

# Que sera, sera

Leo Van den Thillart, head of ‘challenger’ advisory firm, Sera Global, explains the ethos behind the business and the big trends he sees in capital markets

BY ROBIN MARRIOTT

These are exciting times for Leo Van den Thillart.

Since September 2020, the former head of Brookfield’s private funds group has been busy expanding ‘real assets’ global advisory firm, Sera Global, in order to serve clients and challenge other respected players in the space.

The global managing partner says Sera Global, which has carried out over \$100 bn (€86 bn) of transactions to date, is competing against the likes of Evercore, PJT Park Hill, Lazard and Rothschild & Co.

Just over a year into the growth plan, such rivals cannot fail to have noticed this company is serious. After all, in some cases Sera Global has hired directly from them. They also see this emerging challenger assisting the same kind of clients such as REITs, fund managers, operating partners, and institutional investors.

Sera Global is a portfolio company of Canadian giant Brookfield, which has \$625 bn of AUM. It changed its name from BFIN to Sera Global in February this year. At the time, the company said the plan was to hire a dozen professionals in 2021 and up to 40 more in the next stage of growth in North America, EMEA, and Asia.

Headquartered in New York and London, it earns fees from advisory work, namely a hybrid of investment banking, M&A, strategic and capital advisory, secondaries, and private wealth services across real estate and infrastructure. Hires have followed in all these areas, something that has not gone unnoticed in the industry. ‘People who have joined are keen on doing something more entrepreneurial and it is going well,’ says Van den Thillart in an interview.

## STRING OF HIRES

Real estate appointments in the US include Maggie Coleman, Sera Global’s managing



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partner of real estate private capital advisory, who joined from global advisor JLL where she was head of international capital. James Park, a partner in its real estate investment banking team in New York, joined from Evercore’s real estate advisory practice, and Bailey Puntereri, partner in Sera’s private advisory group and also in New York, was previously in the real estate distribution team at PJT Park Hill.

Park says: ‘It really has been great moving over to Sera. I think the vision of what Leo is putting together is this concept of integrating various different capabilities that traditionally tend to be siloed. The ability to work together, thinking about a situation together, I have found incredibly value-add. I used

to joke with people in my past history that when going to a meeting – I had brilliant colleagues – we were in many ways substitutes for each other. I now have the opportunity to go to a meeting with someone like Eoin Bastible, who truly complements my experience and viewpoints. That breadth of perspective is really incredibly valuable not just in terms of the capabilities we bring as one team, but I have found we have an ability to think things through on a holistic basis.’ London-based Bastible, former MD and head of business development EMEA, real estate & private markets at UBS, joined in July as partner responsible for capital coverage, origination and business development for the private capital advisory practice in EMEA. He is responsible for both real estate and infrastructure.

The earliest joiner in Europe was Damien Smith, previously from The Townsend Group and UBS Wealth Management. He joined last November in London as managing partner, strategic advisory product development.

Later, Ian Currie, executive director of private capital advisory who at MEC Global Partners was responsible for capital raising for European affiliate Europa Capital and TA Realty, also signed on.

Also in London is Patricia Wilkinson from placement agent Threadmark, while Susanne Pamin joined from Germany’s Selinius Capital and is based in Frankfurt.

In the US, Sera Global has also attracted talent such as Zaahir Syed, co-head of real estate for its private capital advisory team, who was with JLL, Lazard, and Blackstone. James Snook, VP of investment banking, joined from Cushman & Wakefield.

But this is all just in real estate. Specialists from the fields of infrastructure, secondaries, renewables, sustainable investments, and private wealth channels have also been added to the ranks from impressive industry stalwarts such as Macquarie Infrastructure

and Real Assets (MIRA), Landmark Partners, Goldman Sachs Asset Management, and Merrill Lynch.

Under the direction of Irene Mavroyannis, managing partner and global head of infrastructure, Sera has also been driving the growth of its infrastructure private client advisory business across North America, Europe and Asia.

## BRIGHT SPOTS

Personnel growth aside, Van den Thillart says the operating environment for Sera has been challenging over the past year due to Covid-19. But there are bright spots too.

‘Of course, Covid-19 is difficult. Travel is challenging – there is no question about it. But that said, it is a very interesting market. I see a market that is in transition and much more focused on ESG, for example. Investors are prioritising and making choices, whether it is impact investing, ESG or transition energy – it is real, and we really see that. We also see continued consolidation among managers as well as sector specialisation.’

Within its M&A practice, Sera Global is assisting asset managers who are looking to sell an interest in the company or investors looking to take a stake in a company.

‘In terms of managers looking to acquire smaller managers this is off the charts!’ he exclaims. ‘Sometimes they are taking stakes in smaller managers or providing seed capital. Larger managers are looking to get into smaller operators too in order to get closer to the assets and the expertise.’

Recapitalisations are also big business. It is about working with large public REITs or large operating companies and infrastructure enterprises to help them with recap strategies to strengthen the balance sheet. Last year, US healthcare REIT Welltower sold three healthcare portfolios for \$1.3 bn, a senior housing portfolio for \$702 mln held in an 80/20 JV with an operating partner, and announced a \$402 mln JV with Invesco Real Estate for a portfolio of 20 outpatient medical buildings previously 100% owned by Welltower.

Some clients are pivoting into asset management – usually operators contemplating how to expand their platform by tapping the markets or moving into institutional private



JAMES PARK



MAGGIE COLEMAN



EOIN BASTIBLE

‘What you see in certain areas is managers expanding into different asset classes, for example infrastructure managers going into real estate which is a natural progression’

wealth. Van den Thillart says he has ‘definitely’ seen a migration to sector specialisation. That is occurring even within sector specialisations. For example, residential companies are migrating to regionally focused or affordable homes.

In its private capital advisory team, Sera is seeing a lot of demand for secondaries transactions. It is also looking to raise capital for new emerging managers and existing managers eyeing new regions or financial channels. These are focused on structures such as JVs, separately managed accounts, and blind pool funds. Demand from very large institutional investors is coming as they look to form clubs, syndicates, or partnerships with operating partners for much more specific sectors.

## INSTITUTIONAL INVESTORS

Another trend is that institutional investors are consolidating. Local authority pension funds from the UK are pooling resources. Similar moves are happening in the Netherlands as the number of investors gets cut while they form fewer but much larger entities. Some of these investors want exposure to specialised assets but if they do not pos-

sess internal expertise they look to get that through an operating partner.

The good news for the industry, says Van den Thillart, is that investors are ‘not sitting still’. Covid-19 has accelerated pre-existing trends, leading them to rebalance and focus their portfolios. ‘We do not see them sitting on their hands. That is perhaps a surprise given everything happening around the world, but they are taking action. They are investing in incumbent managers to the extent those managers are in high priority areas of interest.’

In its product development business, Sera sees a lot of traditional asset managers looking to move into the alternatives space. Some of this is ‘design and build’ while others are entering alternatives via corporate acquisitions. ‘What you see in certain areas is managers expanding into different asset classes, for example infrastructure managers going into real estate which is a natural progression,’ says Van den Thillart.

‘What’s also amazing is there are entrepreneur operators and asset managers that are just continuing to innovate and find opportunities, maybe specialising in last-mile logistics, proptech, and retech, and we are seeing some really interesting things among technology and service companies who are making things more efficient,’ he notes.

‘The other area of interest is transition energy and the movement towards decarbonisation. Again, technology is making things more efficient. We are dealing with entrepreneurs and operating companies in that space.’ Van den Thillart highlights ESG and the decarbonisation agenda as a very powerful theme. ‘Europe is a very exciting place to be in terms of ESG. In some cases, Europe is taking the lead,’ he says.

And if Sera Global gets its way, it will be playing a significant part. ■